

## Identity

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### Case study

*Nahira is 18 and studies speech therapy. When she was 10, she came to Belgium with her parents and sister. As the eldest of the family, she is very perfectionist. She experiences a pressure to choose: should she choose Flemish society and reject her parents? Or should she break with her Belgian friends and choose her parents' culture? This is a question that constantly occupies her mind, to the extent that it gives her anxiety attacks and at times completely blocks her. She feels alienated, as if she does not belong anywhere, and dissolves into complete nothingness. Her biggest fear is not being able to choose.*

## General

### Super-diverse society

- Dealing with diversity is one of the main challenges of our society today.
- Emergency services face the same question: how do we deal with the complex stratification of a multicultural reality?
- Very often we bump into the question of whether life is impossible for bicultural youth. Do they really fall between two chairs or does it just seem that way? And if so, what can social workers do to support them in this?

### Context of 'difference'

- In an increasingly diverse and complex society, people are searching for their individuality.
- The emphasis in an individualistic society is still far too often on external differences. After all, everyone wants to be unique and special. But aren't these external differences an invitation to see the deeper similarities between people? Herein lies the challenge for a collective story.

## Id.

- **Our identity is very much contextualised.** Identity is a kit, a set of elements that our environment provides us with. Those elements can be very different depending on where and when we grow up. .
- **Identity is dynamic:** over the course of one's life, new elements are added and others disappear. Our identities give us an entry point to belonging. That is why people sometimes adjust their identity.
- **Yet there is also a degree of continuity;** identity is not constantly changing. Identity is a process that keeps taking new forms at the intersection of past and present experiences.

- **Belongingness and identification are two important ingredients.** I feel connected (identified) to a certain group, a certain context, a certain country, a certain theme, but that does not always mean that my sense of belonging is then assured. This means that identity is also **a social process**.
- **So we do not determine identity alone:** "*The self-concept is not a psychic private reality; it forms in and through the social context and through participation in the social environment.*" Identity is shaped by social mirrors from the environment (information we receive about ourselves from others).

### Multiple identities

- **No one person coincides with one identity.** People used to think your true self was hidden somewhere deep and you had to dig to find it. But identity is more like a cake, each piece of which tells something about you as a person.
- **Multiple dimensions define your identity:** gender, class, religion, ethnicity ... All these things affect your life. Are you disadvantaged or not? What choices do you make? How do you feel? How do you act? Etc.
- **Aid is positioned and contextualised:** each aid worker is also part of a certain class, gender, ethnicity, etc. These dimensions will jointly influence the subsequent counselling process. Thus, social worker and client have multiple identities, which are part of this whole. However, not all identities are equally visible. Therefore, it will be difficult to be conscious of them.
- **Often the identity of clients with a different culture is reduced to ethnic identity.** This makes us look at the person's story through narrow glasses. We risk making diagnostic and methodical mistakes.

## Sub-identity

- **Some sub-identities are overexposed in our society, others underexposed.**
  - Overexposed:
    - *the ethno-cultural origin*
    - *religious identity*
  - Underexposed:
    - *the socio-economic* (previous education, financial situation, employment situation,...)
    - *political and social identity*
- **Consider clients first and foremost as individuals with different partial identities.** Don't just look at the faith community or culture. Take all sub-identities seriously, not just those that are most visible to you, or most different from your own identity.
- **Don't treat clients from different cultural or philosophical backgrounds differently.** No doubt the professional skills and tools you use differently will help them too.
- **Make a list of the three sub-identities that have the most impact on the client's request for help.** For example:
  1. stage of life
  2. gender
  3. philosophical frame of reference

## Dual consciousness

- *Double consciousness* implies that people live in constant tension: **the tension between here and now and the desire to be elsewhere** (Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 1997, p. 255).
- **Dual consciousness implies attachment to two contexts:** the dominant culture and the culture of origin, with its values and norms, codes, which help shape everyday life.
- **The tension is unbearable because it involves an irreversible process.** That phenomenon worsens when people feel excluded (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 1993, p. 10).
- **Sometimes the other's view of ourselves can be very defining.** The impossibility of detaching from that view of the other, the environment, society can drive people to eventually coincide with it and think the same about themselves.

- **Migration does something to social capital.** Because what if humans cannot exist with dual consciousness? You have to choose: you are one or the other, you belong to one or the other.
- **The difficulty of dual consciousness is also discussed in literature.** For example in W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903): *"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."*
- Yet two souls, two thoughts and clashing ideals can find their way from **a deep sense of survival.**

### The self *under construction*

- We always test ourselves against the other in forming identity, personality and self-awareness. But **what if that other is a part of your individuality** that you cannot simply push away?
- Du Bois argues that dual self-awareness constantly forces us to construct a truer and better self. In that process, we also want little of the old self to be lost. It is **the pursuit of both identities** without being cursed by peers and without doors and opportunities closing in front of you.
- Having to choose between two cultures or frameworks **impoverishes young people's emotional and cognitive development**; it forces them into a straitjacket.
- **Multiple identities offer a possibility in which you don't have to make choices.** We call it an and-and choice: you can (for instance) be both Western and Muslim.

### Context blindness and deployment obscurity

- **Context blindness** means you don't see what you don't know. If you have little experience with bicultural young people, perhaps not all their efforts are visible to you. How does the young person try to compromise to combine their partial identities? What do they have to sacrifice on a daily basis? The stress that young people often experience, for example, is the pressure from the environment to choose.
- **Deployment eclipse** means we miss the commitment of these young people.

## Active pluralism

You cannot know everything about all cultures and worldviews. **Active pluralism** refers to a negotiation process between you and the other. The focus is on the negotiation, not the end result:

- Don't be afraid to ask for follow-up on statements or arguments you don't understand.
- Formulate your questions in a respectful manner.
- Make it clear why you are asking those questions.
- Make sure your focus is not on differences. Between sub-identities, there are a lot of aspects you can pick up on.
- Don't try to gloss over the differences either. You don't have to agree on everything.

## Empathy and recognition

People want **recognition** for who they are. They also want a sense of belonging. The feeling that they are allowed to be there, despite differences. **Empathy** is about taking perspective: you can empathise with the other person's viewpoint.

- Give compliments when you can; it motivates.
- Set exemplary behaviour; you are a role model.
- Clients often identify with their counsellor.